



Pick Your Path to Health

Family: Get Support from Those Who Care

What is Family?

According to the American Heritage dictionary, the word "family" means "parents and their children; a group of persons related by blood or marriage; members of one household; or a group of things with common characteristics."

Well, this definition is correct, but not complete. What is missing is the emotional and spiritual bond between people in a family. So for the purposes of this article, family will simply be "people who support and care for one another."

When you think about family, it probably brings up a mix of emotions. And, if you're like most people, family is what keeps you going, what brings you joy (most of the time), and what you depend on to get you through the ups and downs in life. Some women have painful memories when they think about family. It is important to remember that family is not just the people you live with, family can be friends, co-workers, neighbors, church members, anyone you form a strong attachment to and who supports and cares for you and whom you care about.

Family Ties

"Family has always been the foundation of Black people in this country," says Reverend James Gilchrist of Washington, D.C. "We know that our family will always be there for us and that they help us get us to where we need to go."

Lynnette Liverpool knows exactly where *she* needs to go. She is leaving on a plane from Reagan National Airport in Washington to visit her daughter Nina and new grandson, Gebrill, in Florida. "She just gave birth on Monday and I want to be there to help her take care of him. She also has another boy who is two years old and I know that's going to be a handful. I'm taking my vacation to go down there for two weeks to help out," she says.

Some women find family ties within their network of friends. Denise Edwards comes from a small family, but always wanted to be part of a large family. "I always wanted to feel the kind of closeness like they

showed on TV on the Waltons and the Cosbys. Growing up, we never had family reunions, visited relatives or got together for the holidays. It was always just my brother, my mother, and me. I'm not complaining. I love them, but I always felt something was missing," she explains. Denise and co-worker Barbara, who comes from a **very** large extended family, became close friends and Denise started going to Barbara's family's functions—reunions, barbecues, church dinners, you name it. Denise soon became part of another "family" as well as her own.

Whether it is staying in touch with your family or creating family ties with your friends, having a family to support you is important. And once you have your family connections established, it then becomes a matter of working to keep a healthy and happy balance among your familial relationships.

Promoting and Preserving Family

Although you're very busy with all the things you do to take care of your family—going to work, doing house chores, taking a neighbor to the store, cooking, helping your children do their homework—there never seems to be enough time to spend the kind of time you would really enjoy with them.

Here are some suggestions on additional activities for spending time with family and ways to get the support that you need.

- **Share in weekend potluck picnics or barbeques:** Invite family, friends, and neighbors over and share the food and fixing it as a way to get together.
- **Write down your family history and pass it on to your children and grandchildren:** Talk to older relatives, visit your family and make sure your children go with you to learn about their history as well.
- **Attend family reunions:** If your family doesn't have reunions, start a tradition and organize one yourself. Get others to help you.
- **Encourage family time/talk:** Set aside time when the family just talks, says what is on their minds. Let your family know what you need, what you expect, and work on ways to keep communication open.
- **Make time for yourself:** Make sure you take some time just for yourself-10 or 15 minutes everyday or more to do what you need to do for yourself (exercise, gardening, read a book, take a walk, and so on).

- **Get in touch with family you haven't heard from in awhile:** Call, write, email or just send a card to let them know you're thinking of them and that you'd love to hear from them.
- **Have a monthly (or more frequent) night out with the girls:** Sharing and having fun with close friends ("family") is healthy and healing for the soul.
- **Tell your family, especially your children, that you love them.**
- **Create a "staying healthy" family tradition:** Take part in the national campaign, "Take A Loved One to the Doctor Day" on September 24, 2002. Make sure loved ones who wouldn't regularly go to the doctor go to one. Make it a family day.

On your path to better health, make sure that spending time with "family" is a top priority.

For additional information on health issues affecting African American women and their families contact:

- **Closing the Health Gap, Take A Loved One to the Doctor Day,** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1-800-446-6472, www.healthgap.omhrc.gov.
- **National Women's Health Information Center,** Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1-800-994-WOMAN, www.4woman.gov.
- **Department of Health and Human Services,** 1-877-696-6775, www.dhhs.gov. (many programs and services for families)

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."